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Communication - A Key to Finding the Right Collegiate Athletic Program

By Chris Strausser, Founder of Getting in Edu

Editor's note: Lafayette resident Chris Strausser's new venture, Getting in Edu, focuses on providing high school student athletes and their parents direct access to the expert advice of today's college coaches and admissions officers. Lamorinda Weekly asked Strausser to share collective insight from his interviews with these experts about the importance of communication to the successful transition from high school to college athlete. For more info, go to [GettingInEdu.com](#).

A big myth of collegiate athlete recruiting is that the process starts on July 1st of an athlete's senior year. But wait until then to start thinking about collegiate opportunities, and expect disappointment.

Bret Simon, head coach of the Stanford men's soccer team offers this warning to high school athletes: "Waiting to be discovered is one of the most common mistakes high school student-athletes make today."

By July 1st of their senior year many top athletes have already made verbal commitments to athletic programs. That's because successful communication between athletes and collegiate programs starts much earlier. The key is that contact is initiated by the athlete, conversation that's legal because the NCAA allows coaches to return emails, speak on the phone (with restrictions), and meet during unofficial campus visits.

That's not to say that coaches aren't looking for top athletes before they hear from them. They are looking - often at younger players. Today's coaches say they are doing more research, watching more high school sophomores compete, trying to find talent before other coaches do. But time and recruiting funds are limited. Top athletes have choices. It's a better allocation of resources, coaches say, to focus on athletes who genuinely want to go to their particular school. Even coaches with travel budgets that allow them to attend showcase tournaments and camps often focus only on those kids that have already expressed interest in their school and athletic program.

So how does an athlete make that early contact? Email works best. But know -- what you write, questions you ask, even grammar - it all makes a difference. And here's the challenge - there are no specific rules. Each school and coach is different. The best advice? Be genuine. Study that school's programs. Ask pertinent questions. Don't pester. And, if there's a video of the athlete, ask before sending.

Some coaches only want to be sent a link to a YouTube video clip. Others, like Cathy Swezey, head coach of the Vanderbilt women's lacrosse team, don't look at videos at all because, says Swezey, they don't tell you how coachable a kid is, how they respond to mistakes, and what kind of teammate they are.

If the biggest mistake a high school athlete can make is waiting to be discovered, the biggest mistake his or her parent can make is narrowing the search focus.

"Too many parents make scholarship (money) the highest priority, and put too much pressure on their child to focus on the scholarship schools," says Jenny McDowell, head coach of the 2008 National Champion Emory women's volleyball team.

The problem, coaches and admissions personnel say, is that narrowing that

focus ignores the student's needs - what's the best educational, social and geographic fit. All things that make college a successful overall experience.

And then there are the parents who over-manage the process, giving decision makers the wrong impression.

Kevin Dyerly, Director of Admission at Whitman College says: "Nothing drives admissions officers more nuts than hearing from parents the word 'we.' Each year we hear from parents, 'We did the application,' 'we'll send the common application supplement,' and 'we'd like to set-up an interview.' Of course, this doesn't help or reflect well on the child."

And it's not only admissions officers who notice.

Coaches coach athletes, not their parents. They want athletes who are passionate about their sport, fully committed to what a particular school's sports program has to offer. It doesn't matter whether Mom or Dad are die-hard alums.

Says Felix Mercado, head water polo coach at Brown University: "Too many parents put their interests ahead of their child's. We, as coaches, usually see through it. I can tell the kid who is genuinely excited about Brown from the one who is considering it because their parents want them to."

Successful early communication? It begins with honest discussion between parent and athlete, and involves the college coach sooner than you might think.

Avoid disappointment. Start those conversations now.

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